

GIVEN IN TESTIMONY  
BEFORE  
THE HOUSE WORKFORCE AND TALENT DEVELOPMENT COMMITTEE  
ON BEHALF OF  
THE MICHIGAN ASSOCIATION FOR COLLEGE ADMISSION COUNSELING  
MARCH 26, 2015

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee:

**Lori** Good Morning. I'm Lori Johnston, Director of Guidance at East Grand Rapids High School. I have been a high school counselor for 24 years and have worked in both suburban public high schools and in a rural public high school. I am the oldest of four siblings who all graduated from college, but our dad was the first in the family to go to college and graduate. Our mom, a very bright and aspiring woman, never graduated. My grandfathers on both sides of the family were men that worked with their hands and their minds - one in the building trades/lumber industry, the other a butcher and small business owner. They both encouraged a pursuit of passion regardless of the field. Today it takes more than passion and hard work, students need opportunities to experience the array of possibilities in order to have direction for their future.

**Lucas** My name is Lucas Inman. I am a counselor at Grandville High School, which is a large suburban Grand Rapids high school. Previous to that I spent 8 years working at Union High School in Grand Rapids Public Schools as both a Special Education teacher and guidance counselor. I originally hail from a small northern Michigan community. The fabric of my hometown is blue collar and largely involves professions in the skilled trades. I appreciate the invitation to speak with you today.

**Lori** Also with us this morning, providing technical assistance, is Patrick O'Connor, also a past president of MACAC.

We're honored to speak with you this morning and talk with you about the challenges school counselors are facing in their work, and possible solutions to these challenges that can help counselors give Michigan students and families a greater understanding of the options that await them after high school, especially as it relates to options in careers and skilled trades.

The challenges we're discussing this morning are based on our experiences as school counselors, as well as those of the school counselors who are members of the Michigan Association for College Admission Counseling. MACAC gives school counselors and college admission personnel the opportunity to come together for professional development and advocacy activities that touch all facets of our work--in fact, our annual conference begins today in Kalamazoo, and our college fairs in Grand Rapids and Novi will be held next week. We appreciate the opportunity to speak on behalf of our counseling colleagues today from throughout the state; more information about MACAC can be found in the folder you've been provided.

**Lucas** As we think about the challenges school counselors face, there are some that impact everything we do with our students, and that includes the number of students we're assigned to serve. The

National Center for Education Statistics puts Michigan's counselor ratio at 706 students per public school counselor, the 5<sup>th</sup> largest ratio in the United States. As a point of reference, the American School Counselor Association feels school counselors can only offer the complete array of counseling services all students need and deserve when the ratio is 250 students per counselor.

This high ratio has a very serious impact on our ability to serve students in all aspects of our work with them—academic, personal, social, career and college counseling. While much of our work involves group lessons and whole-class presentations, there is a point where the individual needs of students—and our respect for their privacy—require the one-on-one time that's simply hard to find with a caseload this large, but still important to offer, if we are to meet the needs of our students.

There are three solutions to this challenge that are making a difference in the lives of counselors and students. Several dozen Michigan high schools have hired college advisors, recent college graduates who assist school counselors in their work with students. Once the counselor has helped the student develop their college plans, the advisors do the key follow-up work with students, making sure college applications are completed, helping students make plans to visit college campuses, and, most important, making sure students and families complete their financial aid forms. These partnerships free up the counselor's time, allowing them to offer more counseling services of all kinds. More information about one of the college advisor programs in Michigan can be found in the folder you received.

A second solution to the challenge of high caseloads comes from Colorado, where their legislature has just renewed a program designed to help districts create more funding for school counselor positions. By offering seed funding for the first five years of a counseling position, the state gives districts the opportunity to hire and train new school counselors, with an emphasis on dropout prevention. The success in dropout prevention increases the amount of per pupil funding the district receives from the state, giving the district funding to pay for the counseling position—and usually more. More information on this innovative program can also be found in the folder you received.

**Lori** A third solution to high caseloads involves a closer look at the amount of time counselors spend on tasks that are not directly related to counseling services. It isn't unusual for counselors to be taken away from their work to serve as a substitute teacher, organize the logistics of the school's testing program, create the school's master schedule, or assign discipline to students.

Counselors appreciate the need to do their share of this community—building work, but too much time spent on these activities takes counselors away from their work with students, just as it would if a classroom teacher were taken away from a classroom full of students to work on an organizational task, leaving the students to fend for themselves. This is one of the topics of a principal-counselor summit MACAC is presenting this fall with the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals; we look forward to this opportunity to find common ground in the best interest of students.

**Lucas** As we consider challenges more specific to career counseling, information on career opportunities, including skilled trades, is sporadic and found in many different arenas. I can wholeheartedly state resources available to us to help promote and better understand careers within the trades field has increased recently. Both our county ISD and local community college have made it

easier to bring in resources in the areas of careers in the trades field. However, it is in the infant stages and none of us are completely familiar with the resources yet. We are still trying to understand how to access and utilize them. Having these resources in a combined and easy to access would undoubtedly help.

A coordinated effort to create statewide resources—an online directory of career and skilled trade Web sites, expanded information in the Michigan Postsecondary Handbook on skilled trades, and sample, “Best Practices” lesson plans for group and individual instruction in careers and skilled trades—would make the most of the limited time counselors have to spend with students, and make sure counselors are using quality materials that offer the latest information.

**Lori** Access to information relates to another challenge counselors face—the initial and ongoing training they receive in career and college counseling. The results of a 2011 College Board survey indicates that “(S)chool counselors in Michigan report that their training inadequately prepared them for their jobs, that they desire increased training and that their training rates lag behind those of their counterparts nationally. This combination may indicate the need to refine preservice and in-service training requirements for school counselors.” These findings confirm what MACAC’s school counselors have indicated in surveys and discussions; if there was one thing they could change about the training they received before they became counselors, it would be more in-depth training in career and college counseling.

**Lucas** This lack of strong preservice training has a lasting impact. The job market is tough to stay current with, and this decreases confidence with counselors. To me this is a far-reaching issue. It is hard to stay on top of the evolving topic of careers. This creates uncertainty which too often results in neglect, because counselors don’t have a strong grasp of careers to begin with. One school counselor I know is phenomenal with addressing student issues. She does it all day because she likes it and is undoubtedly successful in this area. She went into counseling because of her interest in Psychology and human service. I find no blatant fault in her approach. Yet the common downside with this is that she has no interest in learning about the trends in careers and skilled trades. She is not confident with it and has no clue where to find this information. Consequently it is not part of the services she provides. Stronger pre-service training in career and college counseling would highlight the importance of these areas, and give counselors a more realistic picture of the demands of today’s school counselor.

**Lori** The constant changes in careers highlights another training challenge—the ongoing professional development needs of counselors once they’re working with students. The same College Board survey of Michigan counselors, which is in your packet, states “a majority of counselors report a desire to spend more time on professional development or in-service training.” At the same time, cuts in school counselors across the state means those still on the job are needed more than ever in the schools, making it difficult or impossible for them to leave the building, and access the training that would build or improve their career and college counseling skills. This cycle almost guarantees counselors will be behind in their knowledge of career and college trends in just a few short years. Make no mistake—funding for professional development is also an issue-- but there are many free training programs counselors simply can’t get to.

**Lucas** When it comes to improving the training of Michigan's school counselors, two steps can be taken. The current laws and codes covering the training of counselors are very broad; they mention college and career counseling as two of the many skills where counselors need training, but give no specifics in the content of these areas. This has led to some counselors receiving far less preservice instruction than others in career and college counseling. Modifying those requirements to create a higher, more consistent level of preservice training would give all counselors the strong start they need to serve their students and families.

The same is true for the current continuing education requirements counselors must fulfill. In order to maintain their licensure or certification, school counselors must complete continuing education courses, but the content of these courses is largely left up to the counselor to select. Requiring counselors to complete a certain number of hours of professional development in career and college training would go a long way to make sure counselors have access to the latest information in these areas.

**Lori** Counselor access to professional development is another area MACAC and MASSP will be discussing at this fall's principal-counselor summit. In addition, the area of preservice training for counselors is a topic that's being discussed at the national level, not only by the White House as part of their Reach Higher initiative, but by the nation's leading school counseling associations, and the organizations that support the training of school counselors. It is anticipated that by the end of the year, those involved in the discussions at the national level will have reached a consensus about the training/skills counselors need to effectively help students plan for their post-secondary lives. School counselors are excited to see so much attention devoted to this important topic, at both the national and state levels.

**Lucas** Another area that offers a big challenge in career counseling is graduation requirements. Too many students who would benefit from the current offerings in career and skilled trades education struggle through 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade, especially in subjects like Geometry and Chemistry. Consequently, they are forced into a credit recovery program that often entails sitting behind a computer attempting to complete online make up courses. Instead of enrolling in two year program at the local tech center, where they would thrive, they become further disenchanted with education. Success does not often follow when a poor student is asked to make up math and science courses in an on-line format. This cycle seems to be on the rise. We are missing a huge population that needs CTE training the most.

**Lori** This also impacts the counselor and their ability to work with students, since credit recovery is one of the reasons we have so many different paths to high school graduation. Between Michigan Merit Curriculum requirements, local graduation requirements, personal curriculum and a list of exceptions for students in Vocational programs, it seems there are as many ways to graduation as there are students. We are asked to be experts on all these approaches, but often don't have the time it takes to explore/understand the program or spend time with the student to find the best opportunity for them.

These challenges suggest it may be time to review high school graduation requirements and see how avenues of access might be improved for students interested in careers and skilled trades.

**Lucas** The last challenge we'd like to raise this morning is increased awareness of skilled trades in our communities. Having dialogue with the suburban parents I work with about a path that does not involve a four year college is difficult and often unsuccessful. I once had a parent request a new guidance counselor because I encouraged their son to visit our county CTE program—they wouldn't even consider it as an option.

An important way to overcome the misunderstandings and lack of awareness about careers and skilled trades is through increased partnerships with schools and the business community. By creating more internships, job shadowing programs, and summer opportunities for career exploration, schools and local businesses can help students and parents develop a greater appreciation of the importance of skilled trades and other careers, as well as the economic and personal benefits students can realize working in this thriving sector of Michigan's economy.

**Lori** We are most grateful for the opportunity to speak with you this morning, and we hope the identification of these challenges is of help to the committee in their work. We also hope it leads to real changes in the opportunities counselors can help create for their students. Additional information can be found in the packets you've received this morning, and we would welcome the opportunity to answer any questions you have, if time permits.